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3. Denmark. The Rise of the Danish People's Party

Christian Martin Bächler and David Nicolas Hopmann

Introduction

In the 2015 elections to the Folketing (Danish Parliament), the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party (DF) received roughly 21% of the vote, rendering it the second-largest parliamentary party after the Social Democrats and the largest party in the non-socialist political bloc, the so-called blue bloc.

Danish research on populism focuses primarily on the DF. In this chapter, we will therefore discuss in what ways one can conceive of the DF as a populist party and what factors can explain the party's dominant position in the blue bloc 20 years after its launch. In 1995, the party was founded by a group of politicians who had originally been active in the Progress Party, which will also be discussed in this chapter. A fair amount is known about these populist parties, their communication styles, and their typical voters, as well as the conditions for populism in Denmark. Research, however, becomes less extensive on populist political communication in relation to the media and the public.

Research on Populism in Denmark

Similar to those in other countries covered in this book, researchers on populism in Denmark did not have recourse to a single, universal definition of populism. Most of the reviewed literature only briefly mentions the characteristics of populism, but some texts go further and explicitly discuss the concept. To elaborate on all definitions would be beyond the scope of this chapter. However, Klages (2003) defined populist movements as representing "the ordinary citizen" and having an anti-elitist reasoning. Based on a discussion of theorists such as Taggart, Betz, and Immerfall, the author defined communication by populist actors as characterized by negative argumentation and attention to issues that, according to the populists, no other actors politicize. Considering the communication style, Lund argued that right-wing populism states things in an acceptable manner but implicitly means them in an ugly manner (2003, p. 221). Widfeldt (2000) stated that many definitions of populist and extreme right-wing parties are often normatively loaded. In his discussion of recent trends in Scandinavia, Widfeldt followed Taggart's understanding of *new populism* and defined what he called populist right parties as being led by charismatic leaders, appealing to the ordinary man, and representing political ideas leaning to the right—in particular those to do with the economy but also those concerned with culture, including immigration (Widfeldt, 2000, pp. 487–488). Not all researchers found this more ideological aspect of new populism relevant. Observing populist parties in Scandinavia, Southwell and Lindgren (2013), for instance, argued that "most of these parties do not fit conveniently into a left-right political spectrum" (p. 128). Accordingly, right-wing ideas are not by themselves part of populism's definition. This observation fits in with Klages' definition. She noted that populist actors address issues that the public regards as important and gives examples of policy positions that are not exclusively right wing (Klages, 2003, p. 407), demonstrating that populism cannot be associated with one particular ideology (p. 405).

Looking at these definitions, two things are clear. First, even though these definitions were all applied in a Danish context, they reveal some variation in the understanding of populism, and second, the definitions in some cases do not square fully with Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) three indicators of populism (reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups). In contrast, populism is sometimes defined by its organization (e.g., charismatic leadership), by its "thin" or hollow ideology, or by other elements of populist political communication (e.g., addressing supposedly ignored issues).

That a substantial part of the literature did not elaborate on the concept of populism might be the result of research being empirical rather than theoretical. In part, this empirical research focuses on single case studies (e.g., Southwell & Lindgren, 2013, who examined the DF). Primarily, the research that we reviewed combined the case of the DF with one or more other cases from Denmark or other countries in a comparative perspective. Rydgren (2010), for instance, was one of several researchers who compared Denmark to Sweden, based on populism having greater success in Denmark than in Sweden, despite the countries being relatively similar. In addition to these studies, surveys were often used to determine who votes for populist parties (e.g., Meret & Siim, 2013, p. 86), and content analyses were used to discuss how populist actors communicate (e.g., Vigsø, 2012, who examined DF press releases). The focus on different aspects of populism and the differences in methodological approaches imply that past research on Denmark did not share the same theoretical starting point. Aside from the common subject of populism, the applied theories dealt with topics such as moralism (e.g., Vigsø, 2012), cleavages (e.g., Rydgren, 2010), and journalistic norms (e.g., Jønch-Clausen, 2010), obviously depending on what aspect of populism and populist political communication the research was covering.

In short, research on Danish populism is characterized by different theories and methods, which may be the result of different understandings of the exact nature of populism. Hence, it seems necessary to briefly identify the populist actors in Denmark and the conditions under which they operate. In general, research on populist actors in Denmark typically began by choosing the DF (and earlier, the Progress Party) as an example of populist parties in Denmark. If these two parties were actually populist was rarely explicitly discussed. In fact, all of the earlier-mentioned indicators by Jagers and Walgrave have been attributed to the DF: reference and appeals to the people (e.g., Klages, 2003, p. 408), exclusion of out-groups (e.g., Boreus, 2010), and anti-elitism both toward domestic (e.g., Dyrberg, 2001) and international elites, such as the European Union (e.g., Jupskås, 2015). Thus, using Jagers and Walgrave's typology, DF members could be classified as *complete populists*.

Not all researchers agree with the above characterization of the DF. For example, Vigsø (2012) argued that the DF is more sales- than market-oriented. That is, the party is trying to sell its policy in the most effective way but is not changing it according to market demands—a factor that he saw as part of the populist approach to politics. In contrast, none of Jagers and Walgrave's three indicators state that parties necessarily have to change their policy according to public opinion. Other authors, such as J. Goul Andersen (2007), refrained from calling the DF populist due to an ambiguity of the term and the party's mobilization of voters across cleavages in mainstream politics. Of course, Jagers and Walgrave's indicators do not preclude a populist party being mainstream or communicating about mainstream issues. The variation in these examples and in most of the literature regarding the DF's classification as populist or not may therefore be due to different understandings of populism.

In addition to the DF and the Progress Party, a few other right-wing actors are sometimes described as populist (Hjarvard, 1999, p. 154; Lund, 2003), but there is not much systematic research about these actors, since most of the research has centered on the DF and the Progress Party. Nonetheless, if we consider only one of the populism indicators, it has been shown that other, non-populist parties also appeal to “the people” in their party manifestos, but they tend to do so in different ways (Jupskås, 2012). Whereas the DF refers to the people in a nativist setting, the extreme left-wing party, the Unity List (UL), refers to the people as a group with few economic and social resources. Referring to the people is not the primary strategy of the Unity List, however. Generally speaking, even though parties other than the DF may have some populist tendencies, populism is not their main communication strategy (see Jupskås, 2012).

The relationship between the two populist parties, the DF and the Progress Party, is extraordinary because the DF started as a split-off from the Progress Party, which has by now left the political scene. Researchers (e.g., Klages, 2003) initially doubted whether the DF would be able to sustain its relatively high and increasing voter support in its newly gained, supportive role to the incumbent government. The DF was in fact able to do so, managing to later increase its number of parliamentary members, as mentioned in the introduction.

The enduring and even increasing support for the DF raises the question of why the party has succeeded in gaining it. Obviously, a large amount of possible contextual factors have been discussed in the literature, such as other parties’ behavior and their positions on issues raised by the populists (Boreus, 2010; Jupskås, 2013) as well as the voting system in Denmark, which allows smaller parties to enter the national parliament (Rydgren, 2004, pp. 476–477). The contextual factor that appears to be highlighted the most is the role of wealth and social cleavages. Though some research argued and found that a high unemployment rate benefited right-wing populist parties (Müller-Rommel, 1998), other findings showed the opposite to be true in a newer Danish setting: A low unemployment rate, rather than a high one, seems to be favorable to the DF (Bjørklund, 2007; Rydgren, 2010). This finding might seem odd if one expects populist parties to mainly appeal to marginalized and unemployed voters. The explanation offered for the apparent contradiction is that low unemployment leaves the political agenda open to value-based issues. An agenda with this focus gives populists a better chance to appeal to their voters. Related to this finding, some researchers, such as Liljeqvist and Voss (2014) and Rydgren (2010), have argued that socioeconomic cleavage has lost its importance in Denmark (although it continues to exist in Finland and Sweden), with the result that Danish populists have had greater opportunity to politicize immigration and national versus international issues, such as promoting an anti-European Union point of view. Following this logic, Ivarsflaten (2005) also concluded—by using Denmark and France as examples—that support for populist parties depends on populist voters being willing to base their votes on issues other than economic ones. Indeed, populist voters hold divergent economic preferences. A salient economic dimension makes it harder for populist parties to successfully communicate those issues on which their voters agree; populist voter disagreement on economic policy might leave populist parties “limited by or vulnerable to the salience of the economic dimension” (p. 465).

Contextual factors do not in and of themselves lead to voter support; a condition for support is that populist actors be well known and accepted by the voters. An important means to reach this goal is the populists’ political communication, which is the topic of the next section.

Populist Actors as Communicators

A substantial part of the research on populism in Denmark mentions the key roles of the former populist party leaders Pia Kjaersgaard (DF) and Mogens Glistrup (Progress Party). For instance, Klages (2003) has described how Glistrup—through his expressive communication style—managed to appeal to “the ordinary citizen.” Likewise, Kjaersgaard has been described as a charismatic leader of the DF (e.g., Ringsmose & Pedersen, 2006, p. 73). These characterizations are often not followed by systematic empirical analyses, perhaps because the party leaders are not the primary focus of most cited analyses. Rather, the party leaders and their communication styles are primarily used to illustrate their parties’ populist political communication. More research on the communication styles of populist party leaders is clearly needed.

The limited amount of research does not imply that the communication of Danish populist party leaders is unimportant. Their communication likely still plays a vital role. For instance, earlier research found that in the second half of the election year 2001, Pia Kjaersgaard was the second most quoted person on immigration issues (next only to the immigration minister) (see Karpantschhof, 2002).

Turning from the party leaders to the populist parties themselves and their political communication styles, it is relevant to first identify the issues that these parties try to place on the political agenda. Klages (2003, pp. 408–409) has stated that the populists’ communication strategy is more issue-based than that of traditional catch-all parties. It is also different in the sense that the latter tend not to be based on a specific ideological framework. A selected political issue may often be immigration; indeed, a large part of the literature either entirely or partly focuses on populist parties’ anti-immigration agenda setting and how they frame this issue (John Andersen, Elm Larsen, & Møller, 2009; Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2009; Boreus, 2010; Dyrberg, 2000, 2001; Green-Pedersen & Odmalm, 2008; Hadj-Abdou, Rosenberger, Saharso, & Siim, 2012; Hellström & Hervik, 2013; Jacobsen, 2013; Karpantschhof, 2002; Klages, 2003; Rydgren, 2004, 2010; Vigsø, 2012; Yilmaz, 2012). Researchers’ tendency to focus on this aspect of the populist agenda setting does not necessarily mean that populist parties always—or even most often—articulate this issue. Exclusion of groups is a characteristic frequently attributed to populist parties, which might have caused the narrow research focus on this topic—a question that needs more systematic research. Nevertheless, some researchers have noticed that the DF has “focused almost exclusively on immigration” (Green-Pedersen & Odmalm, 2008, p. 373).

Scholars have studied how populist parties link other issues on the political agenda to the immigration issue. Using discourse analysis, Dyrberg (2000), for instance, found that the anti-elitist issue is often tied to the immigration issue in the sense that both are seen in contrast to ordinary citizens: The DF sees the political elite as not caring whether Danish traditions are being threatened by immigrants and internationalization. It describes the current government as working little for national interests and instead working for EU interests or international business interests (Jupskås, 2015). Political issues such as welfare, economy, and crime can also be linked to immigration; low-quality welfare benefits, economic recessions, and high crime levels provide fuel for discourses about immigrants exploiting the welfare system and committing crimes (Jupskås, 2015, p. 30; Rydgren, 2004, pp. 485–486).

In sum, previous research indicated that a Danish populist political communication strategy is to try to get the immigration issue on the political agenda, and sometimes this agenda setting

takes place by linking other issues to immigration. As stated in one study: “Veiling was actually more of a side issue, a communicative strategy used instrumentally to push through other political agendas in adjacent policy areas” (Hadj-Abdou et al., 2012, p. 138). This agenda-setting strategy is not necessarily limited to the Danish context, as the same is said about the Netherlands and Austria. Regarding the specific case of veiling, other parties in Denmark subscribed to a “religious freedom” rhetoric (p. 141).

With this knowledge of the populist communication strategy on agenda-setting, it is natural to look more in-depth on *how* the issues are communicated: What kind of language and communication styles are used? Using a broader empirical basis, Jacobsen (2013) found that the DF more often than other parties used identity-based and moral-universal frames. Similarly, Vigsø (2012) found that the DF in its press releases based its arguments on morality. Danish populist political communication therefore seems to some extent to be relying on a morality-based frame, which is supported by the use of specific examples, such as the above-mentioned examples of veiling.

Looking closer at the frames, it is interesting to note that a substantial amount of the research directly or indirectly referred to the concept of “negative other-representation,” which means that one group frames another group as inferior (Boreus, 2010, pp. 133–134). The recurrence of this concept in the quoted studies might be related to their subject matter, which has frequently concerned populist actors’ communication about immigrants. To mention some examples of research findings, immigrants from Muslim countries were portrayed as Muslim fundamentalists (Rydgren, 2004) and refugees as “criminal convenience refugees” (Boreus, 2010, p. 139). Rydgren (2004: 485) further found that the DF often framed national values as being under threat by immigration, often giving “its neo-racist rhetoric a conspiratorial tinge.”

These findings do not imply that there are no limits to populist communication and its framing. Legislation against racist speech, the so-called racism paragraph, and the wish to be acknowledged as serious parties are both stated to be important for the populist actors. The most right-wing statements, therefore, are sometimes made in an implicit way, according to Gaasholt and Togeby (1995). Seeking to be perceived as a serious party might be easier today than in the early days of the Progress Party. Today, other parties’ policy positions on immigration are no longer so very different from the DF’s. Even though, as shown above, other parties’ communication on specific topics may be different, some research found that a basic understanding of “us” and “them” is shared and communicated by most, if not all, parties (Bale et al., 2009; Boreus, 2010; Hellström & Hervik, 2013; Jacobsen, 2013; Yilmaz, 2012). One explanation is that other parties do not want to lose voters to the populist actors, but at the same time, they are unsuccessful at framing the populist actors in a negative way. Thus, they are left with no better option than to follow populist rhetoric and policies (Hellström and Hervik, 2013). Notably, the DF portrays other parties and other organizations that disagree with its views as examples of the elite. The DF distinguishes itself from these groups by applying various phrases to them, such as “the goodness industry” (Rydgren, 2004, p. 487) and “European[s] by heart” (Jupskås, 2015, p. 31).

There is limited research on the communication strategies used by Danish populist actors when approaching different media, thus whether the DF differentiates its communication depending on the media remains largely unanswered. Research has typically focused on one media outlet and has not discussed differences in populist communication depending on the media. We can therefore mention only a few examples of populist communication in different media. Klages (2003) found that the Progress Party focused mainly on tabloid newspapers,

and another study showed that the DF had remarkably few nationwide newspaper advertisements (including tabloid newspapers) during the 2011 election (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2014a). The limited number of advertisements may be explained by Vigsø's findings (2012) that the DF used press releases more frequently than other parties in an effort to make ready-made news, thereby making it easier for the media to cover the story. When applying this press release strategy, advertisements may be seen as less important during election campaigns. The DF is also known for aiming at strict control of communication, restricting its availability even to ordinary members of the party. DF's actions including the erasing of websites and the expelling of members from the party (J. Goul Andersen, 2007).

In sum, according to previous research, a central part of the DF's communication strategy is to politicize immigration in various ways, and a means to raise the political awareness of this issue is to link it to current issues on the political agenda, such as crime, gender, and welfare. The party uses morality and identity-based frames more often than other parties. One of the most prominent frames ("us and them"), however, is today shared to some degree by almost every Danish party. It appears that the DF's communication strategies, with their focus on press releases and fewer nationwide newspaper advertisements, are different from the strategies of other parties—but the findings on this point come from studies with limited time spans.

The Media and Populism

The media might play an important part in connecting populist actors with citizens. How the media chooses to react to populism and how it structures its content may have an impact on how populism is perceived by the public. To mention one instance, a study of newspapers in Denmark showed that much of the attention given to the topic of immigration was actually about the reactions to immigration rather than immigration itself (Gaasholt & Tøgeby, 1995). This type of media focus makes it easier for parties to make their political statements on the immigration topic and might well suit the DF, since one of its main policy concerns is immigration (as shown in the preceding section, Populist Actors as Communicators). This example, among others, stresses the importance of investigating the media's reaction to populist political communication further.

Some studies found that the Danish media tend to describe the relationship between citizens and politicians as tense, with the ordinary citizens being victims and the far-from-reality politicians being unreliable (Hjarvard, 1999; Jøneh-Clausen, 2010; Phillips & Schrøder, 2004). An example of this kind of framing is a story about a person suffering from cancer who was not granted special housing, the local politicians being unwilling to listen to his complaints. The Danish tabloid paper, *Ekstra Bladet*, presented this case as the citizen against the system and local politicians, which resulted in national politicians interfering in the process; one even sued the local municipality. Phillips and Schrøder (2004) and Hjarvard (1999, pp. 175–177) concluded that the media, in using the us-against-them point of reference, acted on populism's terms. It thus not only made it easier for the populist parties to express their views but also pushed all the other political parties to communicate in a more populist way.

Related to this discussion, a comparative analysis by Hellström and Hervik (2013) found that journalistic language use differed between Denmark and Sweden: "Unlike the situation in Sweden (especially in 2004) the DF is described as 'one of us'" (i.e., part of mainstream politics) (Hellström & Hervik, 2013, p. 463). This study also found that the media made it

possible for the DF to deliver their populist views to the citizens, since the media did not really question the criticisms of Islam voiced by the party. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there also are examples of the DF being successful in getting its message delivered through the media (Karpantschhof, 2002: 29). From these findings, it appears that the media, by using conflict framing, gives way to populist parties, allowing them to express their views.

More recent research on the 2011 national elections, however, showed somewhat different results. During the election campaign, newspapers often framed politics as a strategic game whenever politicians used negative communication (Pedersen, 2014). This framing is especially interesting since negative communication was part of populist political communication according to Klages. Hence, this finding might imply that populists are unable to use their normal frames without the media at some point critically questioning their communication. Whether such is the case should be investigated in future studies.

In sum, some of the current research argued that the media gives way to populist political communication by using a conflict frame. Other research, however, has observed an increase in journalism discussing the strategic motives of politicians, which might make it harder for populist communication to reach the citizens unfiltered. Future studies are needed to further investigate this area. It has not been possible to address how online media deal with populist communication due to limited research on the topic.

Citizens and Populism

Who are the voters of populist parties and, more importantly, how do they and other voters react to the populist political communication? Turning to DF voters first, a fair amount is known regarding their demographic characteristics and opinions. DF voters are mainly men, but the gender gap appears to change between elections and is thus not moving in one particular direction (Meret & Siim, 2013). Many DF voters are retired, but the voter base also includes younger people. DF voters often live in rural areas or suburban Copenhagen, and they often have not completed high school. In 1998, only 46% considered themselves to be right-wing (Johannes Andersen, 2000), which highlights that the DF's political position can be ambiguous, cutting across traditional cleavages. A comparison of DF and Progress Party voters' opinions in 1998 (shortly after the DF's 1995 launch and shortly before the Progress Party's departure from parliament) revealed that they were often quite similar. DF and Progress Party voters sometimes differed from other party voters in regard to democratic values and generally appeared to have a lower level of trust in other citizens (Johannes Andersen, 2000).

Reasons for joining the DF contrast to those mentioned by members of other parties. DF members referred to the party leader as a major reason for joining (42% compared with an average of 16%), corroborating the often-mentioned, weighty role of charismatic leaders in populist parties. At the same time, only 10% of DF members stated that one of the main reasons for becoming a member was a desire to influence party policy, compared with an average of 23% for members of other parties (Kosiara-Pedersen & Hansen, 2013).

As to the relationship between communication strategy and voters, it is interesting that active DF campaign members largely consider themselves to be working in the service of the party rather than a specific political candidate (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2014b). This finding might at first seem counterintuitive if one argues that the party leader's political communication is important. A consideration of the Danish electoral system, however, reveals another angle. A party leader (or any other candidate, for that matter) is only allowed to run for office in one

regionally limited constituency. Party members may therefore not consider their local candidate to be as important as the party leader; and perhaps they therefore campaign for the party rather than their local candidate.

Previous research has not given much attention to the *effects* of populist political communication in a Danish context. The effects of populism are sometimes mentioned (see e.g., Klages, 2003, p. 410, regarding populism's influence on how citizens experience their own role in society) but are rarely investigated explicitly. Likewise, the impact of the media's populist communication style on citizens' opinions has been indicated to be complex (Phillips & Schrøder, 2004, pp. 183–192), but not much systematic academic research can be found elaborating on this topic. Beyond just Denmark, one study noted that European populist parties in general greatly influence national identity and citizens' perception of the European Union; the study refers to the DF as a “prime example of a party mobilizing national identity against European integration” (Netjes & Edwards, 2005, p. 9).

In sum, not much is known about the effects of populist political communication. One might nevertheless expect differences between populist voters and other voters, since other differences between them already exist, such as their levels of trust in others and how important a factor the party leader is to a person who is considering joining a party.

Summary and Recent Developments

The literature on populism in Denmark is characterized by different understandings of populism and different theoretical frameworks. Despite this variation, most of the literature agrees that the (now almost defunct) Progress Party and the DF can be seen as the main populist actors in Denmark. The research indicated that the DF often tries to politicize value-based issues—mainly immigration—and sometimes ties this issue to other political issues in order to indirectly put the immigration issue on the political agenda. When addressing these symbolic, value-based issues, other research unsurprisingly showed that the DF uses morality-based frames. A major immigration frame is “us and them,” which other parties have adopted to some degree as well. The media might help convey populist messages to citizens. Whether the increasing presence of commentators in current affairs programs might make populist political communication harder (or the opposite) remains to be seen. Overall, exactly how Danish voters react to specific populist messages is largely unanswered by extant research.

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